Religious Beliefs, Practices, and Living Conditions among Tharu Ethnic Groups in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This field-based research explores various facts relating to religious beliefs, practices, and resulting living conditions prevalent among Tharu ethnic groups living in Nepal. The research reveals that the religious beliefs and practices adopted by Tharu people remain an inevitable component of their life cycle process and has significant bearing with their living conditions. While Tharu people uphold a strong faith on their religious beliefs and practices and perform various rituals to make their present identity more visible, they are living in subsistence farming for a long period of time and the economic conditions are less than promising as compared to other groups in the society.

JEL Classification: I3, O1, R2, Z1

Keywords: Religious Beliefs and Practices, Tharu People, Economic Conditions

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1. Introduction

Tharu ethnic minorities, like many other indigenous ethnic people in Nepal, believe in supernatural world comprising of a number of practices through which they aim to establish a close connection with divinities and spirits who are believed to influence the destiny of their livelihood. These beliefs are inherited from their ancestors and being practiced for long in the conviction that they affect their life style, security and prosperity. For Tharus, the world is an enormous sacred amphitheater in which people, spirits, and impersonal powers are attentively interconnected and this determines the way of life people live.

Tharus are popularly known as guruwas in Nepal who play the role of a mediator between human and supernatural world in the form of exorcists and try to maintain harmony between two worlds intending to affect Tharu people’s work life balance. The relationships are mediated through obligations and sacrifices and their superstitions go to such an extent that any malady, physical weakness, and natural calamities like droughts, excessive rainfall, damage to crops are supposed to be the result of either the evil desire of the witches or evil spirits. Varya (1971) regards Tharus as believers of ghosts and spirits so the sole object of their worship is to avert disasters believing that when these spirits are pleased, they bring delight, prosperity, and happiness to their community.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the deeper understanding of religious beliefs and practices of Tharus and their effects on their living conditions on the basis of empirical information gathered during the short field observation in two villages in Nepal. The study finds that Tharus practice a number of religious ceremonies and they believe in close connection between what they practice and the way they live their life. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the methodology used in the study. Section 3 outlines various beliefs and practices among Tharu people. The economic condition of Tharu is discussed in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in Sewar Basbot and Bangau village in Dang district of mid-western Nepal in 2019. The study area is well known for Tharu's predominant area of residence with fertile low land where Tharus are mostly engaged in their preferred occupation of farming and animal husbandry. The Tharus settled in this area are known as Dangaura Tharus and are living together in the same communities with other caste groups such as Magar, Gurung, Bramhan and Kshetri.

The study is mostly explorative in nature according to which the required information is collected through field observation and interviews. Among these, the approaches taken were formal and informal interviews, participant observation, key informants' interview, case study, and focus group discussion. Ethnographic and historical approaches were taken to examine the traditional and customary practices of the religious beliefs and practices among Tharu people in the study area. During the course of fieldwork, a flexible approach was taken in the interviews and observations where attempts were made to get the public-folk views of the ideas and issues that the Tharu people face in an conducing environment allowing them to express their views without hesitation. This approach was important because Tharu people were in minority with literacy.

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2 To understand more on Tharu culture, work, and life, see Bista (1996), Rajaure (1977), Regmi (1978), Srivastava (1958), Pyakurel (1982), McDonough (1984), and Guneratne (1994, 2002).
among them was at very low level and thus they were very much hesitant to express their views with people outside of their community.

3. Religious Beliefs and Practices

This section discusses some of the deities and spirits prevalent among Tharus and how their beliefs and practices are related to their ceremonies, festivals, and way of life. Tharu's beliefs and practices are validated through dreams, visions or trances in which the deities and ancestral spirits instruct the ritual specialists in the practices and cult to be followed. There is a hierarchy of ritual specialists who manipulate the supernatural power and approach the gods and spirits on behalf of the people and are supposed to protect their people against the attacks of witches, chronic diseases, and natural disaster.

3.1 Religious Beliefs and Deities

Tharu people worship a variety of deities. Their beliefs on them tend to reinforce each other and their core belief is animism. This kind of religious orientation, which is quite different from orthodox Hindu and other non-Tharu religious orientations, encourages them to pursue Tharuism, a feeling of being Tharu and different from non-Tharus. The religious and social organizations found in the study area was in line with all other Tharu practices prevalent in Nepal.

The religion and worship practice is a complex system as the indigenous deities (with indigenous names), pan-Hindu deities (with Pan-Hindu names) and other spirits are worshipped by Tharus in combination. In course of discussions, some of the elders were even found to be confused with describing many varieties of deities they were worshiping. They held a strong faith though that deities and humans need each other no matter what category they belong to, in that the deities protect humans as long as they are worshipped in a proper way and at the right time. It is an important aspect of Tharu culture that deities are connected to certain areas, such as the village, the house and the forest. In that context, Tharus enshrined three levels of deities namely inside the house in the deity room, in front of the house in the courtyard, and outside the house at some particular location in the village.

Regarding the Tharu Deities inside the House, there is a derurahar (deity room) where they place certain symbolic idols to represent specific deities. Deities are always enshrined in the north-west corner of the room, near and below the mani khamba (main pillar) of the house. Deities are common among all clans but some are specific to certain clans. Gurubaba, Malya, Khekhri and Saura are common deities to all Tharus. Likewise, Byat, Jholi (cloth bag), Barhani (small broom of siru grass), Chaitik Pathya (small basket), Khadga (sword) or Barchi (spear), Saksaki (small bunch of peacock feather), and Churrya (bangles) are the main ritual objects. There are some other minor deities and ritual objects that are kept in the derurahar by some clans according to their family traditions. Lagubasu and Ban Gaidu are divinities and Bhagmarwa (kind spirit of ancestor), Ratanpurwa (same as Bhagmarwa) and Baidawa (a healer) are spirits. Hegri (small Y shaped iron piece called Trishul) and Jakhani (small round shaped object made by clay) are important ritual objects. These all deities and spirits are worshipped with different cultural offerings on the different occasions. On the occasion of Thanksgiving, deities are offered with sathyaura (sweet balls), liquor and water.

For Tharu deities and spirits of the courtyard, they put Bhawani as a female goddess enshrined in the eastern side of the courtyard. The goddess has no physical figure; however, it is a symbolic presence often as a small stone concealed half on the ground. Likewise, Kolhu masan
is an evil spirit worshiped by Tharus and connected with Kol (oil crushing wooden traditional machine). Besides, Raksa is another malicious spirit located in courtyard and must be appeased with ritual offerings. The household chief conduct worships to all household and courtyard located deities.

Tharu village level deities and spirits, on the other hand, are enshrined either inside a little shed and under a tree or in an open space. Tharu people assume that these deities protect the entire villagers and are known as Bhayar consisting of nine altogether and enshrined in the southern border of the village. Usually the village level deities are worshipped annually as well as on special occasions. These deities are worshipped with a sacrifice of animal. There are two annual ceremonies namely dhurrya and haraha gauri for worship conducted before the start and the end of the Dashya dance (described below). Similarly, Thurus worship deities of the cattle shed which are known as Bagar and Dhamraj. These two shrines are located in the bahari section of the cattle shed. Tharus worship Bagar and Dhamraj with a motive of bringing prosperity and security of their cattle and pets.

3.2 Life-Cycle Rituals

Tharu life-cycle ceremonies have been influenced mostly by Hindu beliefs. Ghatwa Karaina (purification ritual of birth pollution), Mur Bhwaj (first hair cutting), Bhwaj (marriage) and death are the major life cycle rituals among Tharus.

Ghatwa Karaina (Purifying Ritual of Birth Pollution)

Birth is regarded a very blissful occasion in Tharu community. When a Tharu woman gets pregnant, she is expected not to go towards cremation site or a burial site or to step out alone in the dark nights or during the time of eclipse. The delivery should happen in bedroom and individuals other than Sorinya (traditional midwife) or those who have to care for the mother and the child, must not touch or enter into contact with a newborn baby and the mother. Those who have to have such contact must take a bath after the contact. For the purification of birth pollution Tharus perform the Ghatwa Karaina (introduction to the water source) ceremony according to which when the baby’s umbilical cord drops out, they perform this ceremony with mother and newborn baby taking a holy bath and then sprinkle swan pani (ritually purified water with gold) over the head of mother and newborn baby. After ghatwa karaina ceremony mother is freed from her confinement and become ready to participate in household chores.

Traditionally, Tharus do not perform name-giving ceremony like the one practiced in Hindu custom. The name can be given at any time after the umbilical cord drops away from the naval and the name selected is used by all the family members and is later established as the real name of the new member in the family. For the purpose of daily use, Tharus mostly use names derived from their position in the sibling hierarchy of the family (such as, Barka for eldest, Manhla for the second, Sadla for the third, Chhotka for the youngest and so forth).

Mur Bhwaj (Head Shaving Ceremony)

Mur Bhwaj is a first hair cutting ceremony of male child. While it is mandatory for every male child among the high caste Hindus and is called Mundan (head shaving), among the Tharus it is performed only for that male child whose birth is considered as a great event for the family. Tharus observe this ceremony during the age of four or five years of male child, on Monday or Wednesday of Falgun month (mid-March to mid-April). On the occasion of this ceremony, homemade holy liquor is offered to the family deities first and then mama (maternal uncle) shaves
the hair of the child by *Chhura* (locally made iron knife by blacksmith). Some kin guests and the *Mahaton* of the village are invited and a feast is arranged in their honor.

**Marriage System**

Tharus regard marriage as their cultural and societal obligation. According to Tharu belief, happiness is the consequent of having a lot of children and then seeing these children married. Tharus aspire to see their houses full of children and grandchildren because these desires are quite natural for people living in difficult climatic and unsafe circumstances like Tharus which result in a large number of immature deaths. For marriage, Tharus follow caste endogamous marriage and within each group the clans are exogamous. Within Tharu group any clan can have matrimonial relations with any of the other clans from any sub-group.

Polygamy, though not common, is socially recognized among Tharu communities. Polyandry, on the other hand, is neither recognized nor practiced. Similarly, polygyny is practiced generally in cases like the barrenness of wife, several deaths of children, and occasionally if the wife does not produce a male child. Sometimes a man disappointed with his first wife or having a serious love affair with other woman marries a girl or woman as his second wife. Usually, marriage is performed in the month of Magh (mid-January to mid-February) because Tharus are free at that time after harvesting. During the interview, one of the respondents said that it was the right time to easily digest all foods as well.

Two types of marriage are most common among Tharu communities – *choti bhaj* and *barka bhaj*. *Choti bhaj* is a very simple and conventional marriage system practiced by poor families. On the occasion, only kin deities and village shrines of both sides are offered holy liquor and a few relatives are invited for the feast. On the other side, *Barka bhaj* is full-fledged marriage practice usually performed by rich families. This marriage ceremony requires big amount of money for grains and liquor. *Mahaton*, Gardhurrya, and relatives all participate in mediating for both boy and girl sides to arrange the marriage and economic status, age, educational level of boy and girl and moral reputation of both sides are duly considered. The final decision is made only when both sides agree in all of these aspects.

There are numerous steps in the course of completion of marriage among Tharus. *Doopdan Galna* (Putting Doob Strands on the Head) is one of the important aspects of marriage which is performed just after the negotiation between bride and groom parties. It is a ritual of official declaration in front of the witnesses including the *Mahaton* of both sides and few other Tharu noble individuals. For this ritual, father of bride goes to groom’s home with some senior individuals including Mahaton and makes an agreement of marriage from both sides. *Thokauni* is another significant ritual of Tharu marriage ceremony following *Doopdan* in the groom’s house and is performed after settlement of *jhaga* (bride price). After *thokauni* ritual is finished, they perform a normal ritual called *syawa lagna* which means offering an appreciation for the bride’s side.

A number of other rituals follow suit. Some of them are *pachas pathi chamal phakna* (delivery of 200 kilograms of husked rice) in the bride’s house in which a number of items are sent to the bride’s family. Another is *karai dina* (drinking from the karai) in which groom offers some *golras* (holy liquor in a pot decorated by family women) as bride’s mother request for it in front of the deities enshrined there properly.
The main marriage ceremony continues for three or four days. Tasks are divided among different people during the event. Bhojuwa is one of the most important persons during the ceremony, usually the role filled by Ghardhurrya or groom’s father whose wife is alive. Bhojinnya (wife of Bhojuwa) is always busy in the ceremonies associated with the groom along with two Nenhariyas (two married girls whose parents are alive and are dressed in ceremonial attire). Surahwas are volunteers of the village and are responsible for supply of firewood and water needed for the marriage ceremony. Panheris are female water suppliers during the time. Likewise, bride’s side also appoint some special participants called Nokandi, a group of several girls who are friends of bride and accompany the bride during her first trip to groom’s house and stay there with bride for some days. Cauthyars are the group of men from bride’s side going to the groom’s house along with the bride. They carry bride in a doli (chariot).

The proper marriage ceremony is called bhwaj and starts on a Tuesday evening of the bright fortnight in any of the auspicious months of Magh, Fagun, Chait, and Baisakh (somewhere from February to May). In the morning of the bhwaj, a small procession goes to a nearby river which is led by local choirs, bhojinnya carrying an oil-lamp in her right hand, and two nenhariy carrying baskets. On the evening of the bhwaj day, the groom takes a meal and gets his hair shaved. Early in the morning next day, the groom takes a holy bath and the groom’s party enjoys an early morning meal called bhimsaria bhat and liquor. After putting formal dress, the groom and his party requested to go to the yard for gham tapuni (sun warming) ceremony. After a number of ceremonies following that, the procession with groom returns home in dwala without bride. On the same day evening, the bride is carried in a doli to groom's home with some nokandis. The bride is requested to come out from doli and placed beside the groom and they perform some rituals in deity room. This ritual mostly brings the main marriage ceremony into completion, yet some other peripheral rituals relating to marriage continue for months.

3.3 Death Rituals

Tharu people categorize death in two types – natural and unnatural death – and the funeral rites are different for the different type of death. The individual dying with natural death can get full-fledged funeral rites whereas died from unnatural death do not get such privilege. According to Tharu belief system, the deceased soul takes rebirth.

On the day of death, most of the elders of the village gather at the dead person’s house and participate in the funeral ritual. The dead body is kept in the bahari section on its back position and the head is in the north direction. The body is covered with Kaffan (white colored new cloth). Few folks collect satbihi (seven types of food grains) to use during the funeral procession. Some earthen vessels are also required for the funeral site and some of them are filled with mustard oil and ghee. They perform hiran khwaune (feeding hiran) ritual to the deceased person. Hiran is a mixture of rice with turmeric powder and the water purified with gold. At first chief mourner puts little amount of mixture in the mouth of the dead person doing some ritual performances and then other members do the same. After finishing a few rituals followed by this, lineage male members and other male members jointly organize the funeral procession.

Tharus take the dead body always in the south of the village in the barren land or in the riverbed for the cremation where they burn the dead body. After the dead body completely burns, they all take a holy bath for purification and return home. Before entering the village, they perform a ritual called thap marna on the way (dig a small hole on the ground) to appease the spirit of the dead. On the same day, they organize a feast called dharam bhat. The mourning of the dead last
for several days until uddhar ceremony is performed. By tradition Thursday is supposed to be an auspicious day for uddhar. During this ceremony all male and female members of dead person’s family gather in the house and the chief mourner shaves his head completely including tupi (little bunch of hair left on the center of the head), beard, moustaches and eyebrow. Other male members of the family also shave their head. Then all of them take a bath and get purified with swan pani (holy water purified by gold).

3.4 Festivals and Feasts

Tharu people perceive numerous festivals aiming to secure safety and affluence of a household or the village community. Many of Tharu festivals are similar to those of Hindus such as Krishna Astami, Dashain, Maghe Sakranti (Maghi) and so on. Maghi is the most important festival in Tharu community which is considered as their new year. Even all Tharus get government-announced national holiday during this occasion. This day also characterizes the end of all annual agreements between master and servants or landowners and tenants involving Thaurus and if needed they must be renewed during or after the festival. After the abolition of kamaiya (contract labor) system in Nepal in 2000, this practice has changed a bit.

Astimki (Krishna Janmastami) is another festival which is the auspicious birthday of lord Krishna and falls on the eighth day of the dark fortnight (Krishna Paksha) of Shrawan month (mid-July to mid-August). Among the Tharus, it is the women’s festival in which mostly Bathinayas (young girls) and other women participate. Bathinayas regard this festival with great importance and all except very young girl and weak women fast for the whole day without taking even water. On the occasion, Astimki mural are drawn in the house of Mahaton and painted over the surface of the big Dehri (earthen grain container) standing at the northern limit of the Bahari section of the house.

Atwari festival, just after Astimki, happens on the first Sunday of the bright fortnight of Bhadau month (mid-August to mid-September), is the fasting festival of only males. On the eve of Atwari, all male members who are going to fast the next day take a heavy meal, called dar, consisting of many food varieties. On the fasting day after performing mandatory rites at the beginning, a senior person among the fasting people offers a small piece of Atwari roti with butter to the holy fire. Atwari roti is a fried bread made from rice floor. The holy fire is kept burning till next morning because they have to cook holy rice in this fire called pharahar which all fasting persons enjoy eating.

During the festival Dasya (Dashain), which coincides with Hindu’s greatest festival Vijaya Dashami, a number of rituals are performed for nine days starting from planting Jiura (early shoots of maize) to Tika (a mixture of rice grains and some holy pastes to put on forehead) on the ninth day. In the ninth day (Nawami), or main day of Dasya festival, women of the family prepare special meals for Piterr (ancestors). In the afternoon of this day, there is a Tika-giving ceremony in the every house and house of Mahaton. Ghardhurrya and other members go to the Mahaton’s house to get Tika carrying Jiura, Bebri (basil) and ordinary liquor. The Mahaton or senior member of the family puts Tika on their forehead. In the evening during the Dasya, a group dance, called Dasya Nach, is performed in every Tharu village with mostly participated by young women and single youngsters. The songs in most cases contain themes from Hindu epic Krishna Charitra (life history of lord Krishna).

Dhureri (Hori) is another festival among Tharu community which is committed to the worship of Bhayar, a significant village shrine of Tharus. According to Hindus, Hori or Fagu
Purnima falls on the full moon (bright fortnight) of Fagun (mid-March to mid-April) but Thaus are not strict concerning the date for this festival and celebrate Dhureri in or around that time with their Hindu neighbors. For the preparation of this festival they bring some branches of Dhairo tree and small trunk of Semar tree. On this occasion some of them take drums and others take cowbells, sing certain songs, and poke jokes at bathiniyas (young Tharu girls).

4. Economic Conditions

This section provides a brief assessment on resulting effects of Tharu's religious beliefs and practices on their economic conditions projected towards their daily life. Like the economy in most other Nepalese villages, Tharu's economic activities in the study area are primarily agriculture-based and complimented by animal husbandry, yet signs of change are emerging in the context of changing economic landscape in the surroundings where they live. This is also in line with the revelation of one of the earlier scholars John Nesfield (quoted by Guneratne, 1994) who found that, when describing the economic life of Tharus in India, they were involved in hunting, fishing, and collecting forest fruits and roots as well, on top of agriculture and animal husbandry. Tharus in study area are living mostly in subsistence farming as opposed to the way people in their neighborhoods are living. The economic condition of other communities is improving due to growing trend in foreign employment and participation in formal sector jobs but it remains not so drastically different for Tharu communities since their economic activities are largely based on traditional methods. Tharus as of late, however, have started seeing benefits of other formal occupations and the prosperity coming in neighboring households and thus now have been attracted to the new occupations.

As seen in Table 1, agriculture, supported by animal husbandry, was found to be the main source of living among Tharus in the study area. Almost all households are engaged in farming and most are dependent on agriculture-related activities, whether as a self-sufficient venture or with some outside income from working at farms. For example, out of 820 individuals, 84.4 percent (a total of 692) worked in agriculture in Bansbot village whereas it was 79.0 percent (a total of 541 out of 685) in Bangaun village. Most of the respondents were found to be saying that they were not satisfied with their occupation but were compelled to follow it (except a few said they were satisfied with it). Different causes were responsible for the dissatisfaction with the traditional occupation and the most common reasons were low social prestige of being engaged in this profession followed by low productivity and hard to work in the agriculture sector.

During off season, when there was no agricultural work, the Tharus remained workless. It was observed that most of the Tharus had cattle in their homes such as pig, cow, buffalo, ox, goat, sheep and chicken, which made the family members a little busy in serving them and provided occasionally some incomes also. Pigs and chickens were considered important because of the practices of giving sacrifice to their deities, gods and goddesses which mandated them to be engaged in these activities and not easily being able to take other occupations. This religious and economic practice of Tharu people appears resembling with Harris’s (1968) theory of cultural materialism. Tharu people’s feasts and ceremonies are not completed without pork and taming pig provided them additional income as well at the same time when they were fulfilling their cultural obligations.
Table 1: Major occupation and employment among Tharu people in the study area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Occupation</th>
<th>Bansbot Village</th>
<th>Bangaun Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage labor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign job (India and abroad)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey in the study area in 2019

Tharu's agriculture-based subsistence life in the study area has widened with the support of local wage earning opportunities available to them generating additional income. As the survey revealed, a 8.2 percent of Tharu population were found to be working as wage laborer in Bansbot village whereas it was 8.9 percent in Bangaun village. Foreign employment, though in small number, had been the area of attraction for many Tharus as they were seeing this happening among youngsters from other communities living aside with them. Those who were in foreign employment had been to India and gulf countries. Some in the village (2.3 percent in Bansbot and 2.5 percent in Bangaun) were also found to be engaged in agro-business ranging from basketry to rope-making and they were economically sound and were upgrading their economic life gradually as compared to those who were engaged in subsistence farming.

5. Conclusion

This paper sheds light on some aspects of religious beliefs and practices of Tharu indigenous people living in Nepal. They believe that these practices make them resilient to forces of nature which is believed to bring security and prosperity in their communities. Their faith, rituals and rites keep them bold and fearless and help them harbor amiable connections with the deities, spirits, and other super natural powers deemed necessary for their existence and successful life. The festivals and ceremonies of the Tharus are occasions of community participation and reciprocity which supports in maintaining their social order and solidarity. Not only these beliefs are in their vindication and power to encounter the natural environment and protect themselves from disasters such as droughts and flood, they believe they also help meet their survival needs. This descriptive functionalist analysis of the religion of Tharus shows similarity with Malinowski’s (1948) theory of social functions of religion which posits that religion is a part of culture with certain functions for the fulfillment of human needs and for the provision of solutions to certain difficulties and problems. In line with this proposition, the evidence derived from this research shows that the religious life of Tharu people has shaped their economic life as well which predominantly relies on subsistence farming. Despite living in abject poverty for long as mandated by their cultural practices, their condition has begun to change over time with widening scope in terms of further economic opportunities available to them to improve their living conditions. The major attractions are to join foreign employment, work as wage laborers in formal job markets, start small businesses.
References


